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Dr. Dara Richardson-Heron's Leadership Lessons | ExCo Insights

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In this series, we explore some of the most important lessons and insights from our executive coaches and mentors. The ExCo Group executive coach and mentor Dr. Dara Richardson-Heron, Former Chief Patient Officer Pfizer, Inc., shares her lessons, including the importance of self-advocacy, prioritizing your battles, and other leadership lessons.

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KEY LEADERSHIP LESSONS

One lesson is the vital importance of advocating for yourself, taking a stand on issues of importance, and being true to yourself during challenging moments in your career. I've faced a number of them, including the time when I was a top performer, but I wasn't invited to be part of high-potential development opportunities and activities. After inquiring, I was told by the head of the leadership development program, "You're already a physician. You don't need to consider additional leadership development opportunities." It was striking to me that she took it up on herself to make that decision for me. No one even thought to ask me.

Some of the most challenging moments I've faced were when I had to decide to leave an organization or a leadership or board role when the vision, mission and culture no longer aligned with my own personal values and brand. They were defining moments and inflection points, because I had a choice: I could either ignore these "macro-aggressions," as I call them, by just keeping my head down and remaining silent. Or I could take a stand and advocate for myself, making it clear that I felt that what was happening was inappropriate or unacceptable.

To be clear, I don't think it's appropriate, or even a good use of a leader's time and energy to take a stand or advocate for every single thing that you don't like. You have to pick your battles and prioritize because it can become extremely exhausting, and it can even distract you from your purpose and calling. Sometimes it might even be more productive to just focus your efforts on making a positive contribution or adding value. But sometimes you have to take a stand and respectfully and professionally push back when something happens that clearly doesn't align with your morals, your values, and your personal brand. Because at the end of the day, you have to be able to look yourself in the mirror and say, "This is what I want my personal legacy to be."

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I find that sometimes people worry that if they take a stand, it's going to have a negative effect on their career. But the lesson I've learned is that if you don't take a stand on the issues and priorities that are important to you, you're forfeiting your chance to be a transformative change agent. And after a while, it's going to derail you personally. If you aren't willing to take a stand on things that really matter to you and even your team, others are going to notice and your inaction will almost certainly have a negative impact on your authenticity.

Another leadership lesson I've learned is the importance of being curious and open to considering non-traditional career opportunities and development experiences to advance your personal growth. The landscape was changing quite a bit when I was training as a physician, and I knew that I didn't want to be a traditional physician with an office and private practice. I wanted to be able to have a broader impact, but there was no roadmap at the time.

So I sought out mentors and began asking questions to explore possibilities. And that curiosity led me to many stretch roles outside of my comfort zone, including leading a medical department for a Fortune 500 company. But these opportunities don't just fall in your lap. You have to keep your eyes open. You have to survey the landscape. You have to see what's available, and even nominate yourself for opportunities. I've charted a very non-traditional course as a physician executive. I've never been afraid to stretch outside of my comfort zone, and I have benefited enormously from the diverse knowledge and experiences I've gained.

WHEN I COACH CLIENTS, WE OFTEN TALK ABOUT...

One theme is the importance of developing and advancing team members for optimal impact through what I call "precision engagement." I find that leaders sometimes forget that their role is to authentically develop and advance their team members, which is incredibly rewarding if it's done right. The

most successful leaders don't look at their workforce as a monolith. They know that members of their team have different skills, passions, interests, motivations, life circumstances, and ways of working. And they need to figure out what those are. So I always ask the people I coach to practice precision engagement, and utilize a series of questions to better understand their team members. What drives you? What motivates you? What doesn't motivate you? What are you passionate about? Why? What type of leader do you admire most? What would be your ideal role?

The optimal outcome of this discussion is an action plan that leverages the team member's passions, talents and interests and really aligns them with the organizational strategy and impact. And honestly, one outcome could even be helping that team member find a new role outside your organization. People tend to be a little afraid of that outcome, but authentic development of a team member means making sure that they are in a place where they can add the most value and where they feel the most passion. Many leaders have told me that this precision engagement approach has led to really positive feedback and significantly higher scores on their engagement surveys. When a team feels seen, heard, respected, and valued, that team is much more excited, creative, and more productive.

Another theme that often comes up is the importance of putting on your own mask first. You've got to find ways to reduce stress and find balance in this crazy world. Many of the people I coach are senior leaders who are moving at the speed of light. They're so focused on the business priorities, KPIs and other metrics that they are failing to take care of themselves. One client shared that he feels like he is on a hamster wheel that never stops. He has absolutely no time to think, and that's a sure recipe for disaster. So the advice I share is that in order to be a transformational leader, you have to put your mask on first and make sure that you are in the right head space and frame of mind to lead with character and empathy.

One important way to do that is to calendar timeouts or reserve time for activities that reduce stress. So many executives I've coached are proud to say that they haven't taken a vacation in months. Well, that's not a good look. Not only is it not a good look for you; it's also not a good look for the team that you're leading or managing, because you're not leading by example. I also advise leaders to block out time in their workday to actually do work, including prepping for an important meeting or presentation. And I ask them to do a "calendar audit" to look at regularly scheduled meetings. Why are they there? What is the priority? It's often very enlightening just how much time is not as productive as it could be. I'll also coach people to identify opportunities to designate other people on their team to join any meetings where their presence isn't critical. And this is a win-win because it frees them up to focus on other activities and also enables them to partner with a member of their team to advance their knowledge, their exposure, their development, and even enhance their executive presence.